

3. Item for Information

Subject	Response to recommendation: ESC/13/16 Digital Skills
Contact Officers	Sara Tomkins, Assistant Chief Executive (Communications, Customers and IT)
	Tel: 0161 234 3706 Email: s.tomkins@manchester.gov.uk

Summary

At its meeting in March 2013 the Committee made the following recommendation:

To request that the Head of the Manchester Digital Development Agency provide the Committee with an update on creating more capacity at MadLab, when this is available.

Response

This item for information responds to the request for an update on work in progress for creating more capacity at MadLab.

Madlab is currently experiencing a period of rapid growth and expansion – in terms of both community usage and in terms of partnerships with other organisations. It is currently struggling in terms of space with regard to a number of community groups, who, in expanding through the support that MadLab has given them, have outgrown the building. It is felt to be imperative that MadLab continues to support and develop these groups and the organisation is looking at solutions as it enters this new phase. MadLab recognises that ultimately, within the next two years, a wider solution needs to be found to ensure sustainability.

Increasing capacity at MadLab

The key determining factor in creating more capacity at MadLab is the successful conclusion of the refurbishment plans for the main operating space on the ground floor. This will achieve:

- removal of an interior column which will increase capacity and line of sight in the space;
- creation of two rooms (from the current one) in order to host more events, including the installation of sliding walls to create one bigger space, the demolition of the lean-to extension and the installation of the new ground floor extension which will also accommodate two new (disabled access) toilets, wet-room and area for the installation of a disabled lift to the first and second floors (the extension will be built in such a way that it can be added to in the future);
- new stairs to meet the required fire regulations and the creation of an extended kitchen space.

The overall benefits of this work include:

- opening up MadLab to the street which will increase presence in the locality;
- creating more capacity, both generally and specifically in terms of disabled access;

- improving insulation to the ground floor (which has been, to date, too cold for some meetings over winter);
- establishing a writers' centre – in conjunction with Comma Press (an Arts Council England NPO which MadLab has partnered);
- creating a teaching space – for schools and local businesses.

In its plan for using the ERF funding granted for 2012/13, MadLab stated that it wished to increase the usage of MadLab as a space. In mid/late 2012 it had 40 user groups. At present, it has over 70. In the same period, all user groups grew in number significantly. The growing success of MadLab's community groups has meant that several groups have recently outgrown the space. For example, Filmonik (film group) has upwards of 500 members and now has to hold many events out-of-house. The MadLab U18s initiative has moved temporarily to the Sharp Project to accommodate the 100+ attendees it has every month, and the Raspberry Pi Jam (a now global event that was created in MadLab) is one of several groups that has to use both floors, which is not ideal. MadLab is also helping community organisations "stand on their own two feet" and secure their own space (e.g. the Hac:Man open hardware group).

MadLab is also in discussion with the Co-op with regards to part of its old site near Victoria Station. This would potentially secure up to 10,000 square feet and, although it is not known yet what the costs may be, MadLab is of the understanding that some of this space may be free with additional space to be rented. In addition, MadLab will need to raise funds quickly to kit-out the spaces, which include:

- A Community BioLab (it will be the first of its kind in the country);
- A Civic Space Programme;
- The Institute for Speculative Futures (which will look at forward thinking technologies and their applications);
- "Gaff" – a theatre development space in association with Arts Council England NPO Hab / Word of Warning;
- A dedicated U18s space.

This may provide a solution to capacity issues in the next 2-5 years but will create two sites. Ideally, MadLab should be housed in one location and this is a key element of current discussions, the intention is to produce a strategy document before Christmas 2013 to explore all of the options in regard to this.

At the same time Madlab is also looking at enhancing its communications strategy. The current website (madlab.org.uk) is considered to be outdated and, although it receives around 40 000 unique hits a month, it is not felt to reflect the work that MadLab does (and has done) around digital engagement. This is now being addressed – and a new website is currently under construction.

Key objectives of Madlab for the next year

MadLab's priorities are focused on increasing the skills levels of Manchester residents especially higher-level skills. MadLab is particularly keen on increasing capacity based on its experience in the following three areas:

- a) The MadLab Omniversity – there will be more courses - 11 courses are being run this autumn – including more courses to encourage the digitally disadvantaged and supporting the Go ON Manchester campaign – e.g. Beginning Coding and Beginning Arduino courses;
- b) Digital Skills for Women in Manchester – the results are that 140 women are engaged through 6 libraries over a period of 6 months;
- c) The ‘Cool and Quirky’ course which was run in Longsight for BME girls aged 9-14, As part of the ERF-led plan, MadLab first worked with Community and Cultural Services (Longsight) in early 2013 on a project called “Cool and Quirky” that ran in Spring 2013 at Longsight Library. “Cool and Quirky” was extremely successful. It worked with 29 girls, engaging them to learn basic electronics (including circuits and soldering) and coding (to show the relationship between physical computing and programming.) Workshops were tailored to girls – with a focus on making items to take home (and continue learning on). In doing so we demonstrated that making and tinkering is not just a skill for boys.